

The Dressmakers of Auschwitz

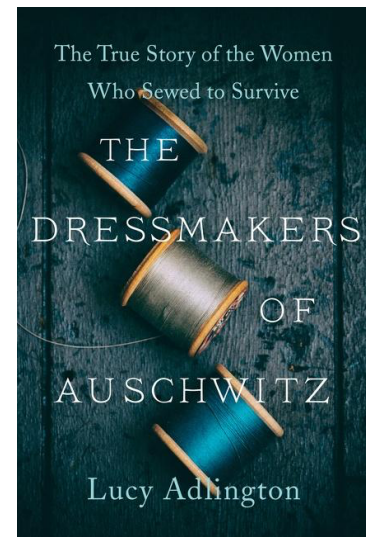
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By Lucy Adlington

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Introduction

A powerful chronicle of the women who used their sewing skills to survive the Holocaust, stitching beautiful clothes at an extraordinary fashion workshop created within one of the most notorious WWII death camps.



At the height of the Holocaust twenty-five young inmates of the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp—mainly Jewish women and girls—were selected to design, cut, and sew beautiful fashions for elite Nazi women in a dedicated salon. It was work that they hoped would spare them from the gas chambers.

This fashion workshop—called the Upper Tailoring Studio—was established by Hedwig Höss, the camp commandant's wife, and patronized by the wives of SS guards and officers. Here, the dressmakers produced high-quality garments for SS social functions in Auschwitz, and for ladies from Nazi Berlin's upper crust.

Drawing on diverse sources—including interviews with the last surviving seamstress—*The Dressmakers of Auschwitz* follows the fates of these brave women. Their bonds of family and friendship not only helped them endure persecution, but also to play their part in camp resistance. Weaving the dressmakers' remarkable experiences within the context of Nazi policies for plunder and exploitation, historian Lucy Adlington exposes the greed, cruelty, and hypocrisy of the Third Reich and offers a fresh look at a little-known chapter of World War II and the Holocaust.

Questions for Discussion

1. The author describes how discovering the history of the real dressmakers of Auschwitz was only made possible through connections made via a fictional story—*The Red Ribbon*. Is Holocaust fiction justified as a creative response to tragedy, or does such fiction distort reality?
2. Sewing skills were once a core part of girls' education, laying a foundation for domestic sewing and mending, and professional work. Is this one reason why textiles are often overlooked in mainstream history—because it has too often been dismissed as 'women's work'? Is there a tradition of home-sewing in your family? Is sewing and textile craft valued these days?

3. In 1930s Germany, consumers were bullied about their shopping choices: told *Don't Buy From Jews*, or to buy from 'Aryan Only' organizations such as ADEFA. How easy do you think it would be to resist such propaganda? Do you (can you?) make active choices about what you buy based on what you think is ethical?
4. When people arrived as inmates in Auschwitz and other concentration camps they were forcibly stripped of everything they wore. Does reading of such deliberate degradation by the SS make you aware of the humanizing power of clothes? How did prisoners attempt to regain a sense of dignity when issued with camp garments?
5. It's easy to say 'don't judge someone by appearances' but we often do make assumptions based on clothes and smartness. The Nazis understood this psychology. How did they make appearances work to their advantage regarding uniforms?
6. In Auschwitz-Birkenau Bracha Bercovič said, "If you didn't have any connections, you didn't have any luck". Through her friend Irene Reichenberg she got a position in the Upper Tailoring Salon. Camp commandant Rudolf Höss sneered at inmates who tried to get better work positions in the camp. How important do you think a network of relatives, friends and allies was for prisoner survival?
7. Marta Fuchs, clever and compassionate *kapo* of the Upper Tailoring Salon, was an active part of the camp underground. Were you aware that their resistance was prevalent in Auschwitz? What were some of the ways in which inmates asserted their humanity and defied their oppressors?
8. Commandant's wife Hedwig Höss described life in her Auschwitz villa as 'paradise'. She profited from plundered goods and enslaved labor, apparently without any moral qualms. Do you see parallels with other systems of slavery and exploitation?
9. The infamous motto on the gateway into the Auschwitz main camp is *Arbeit Macht Frei*—Works Sets You Free. It's clear that work for most inmates in the camp meant suffering and untimely death. For the dressmakers in the Upper Tailoring Salon, their work meant possible safety and good company. How do you think they coped with the knowledge that they were dressing the enemy?
10. Scholar and survivor Dr Lore Shelley née Weinberg dedicated many years to collecting personal testimonies, including accounts written by dressmakers from the Upper Tailoring Studio. Marta Fuchs, *kapo* of the Auschwitz fashion salon, was too ill to correspond with Dr Shelley when invited to do so in the 1980s. Marta had also declined to testify at post-war trials against Rudolf Höss and other SS criminals despite her intimate knowledge of life in the Höss household. What might be the challenges for survivors when speaking of their experiences after the war?
11. Clothes tell stories and hold memories. Many Holocaust museum exhibits showcase personal items that once belonged to concentration camp deportees, including shoes and

clothing. Do you think they give a particular sense of connection with past lives? Do you ever think about who makes your own clothes, and what happens to them once they are discarded?

12. The author was privileged to be able to interview the last surviving seamstress of the Upper Tailoring Salon - Bracha Kohút née Bercovič. Sadly Mrs Kohút died just a few months short of her 100th birthday. What would you have asked her if you could? What would you have wished to say to her?